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ESSAY

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The
32d
Item

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The C.I.A., feeling mischievous this summer, provided the State Department with conversations it overheard when Senator Jesse Helms visited Chilean President Pinochet.

Officials at State, smacking their lips at the chance of embarrassing its most annoying critic, interpreted something Senator Helms said as a breach of confidence and complained to the new chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

Senator David Durenberger, Republican of Minnesota, has pleased C.I.A. and State by keeping intelligence-savvy aides of hard-line senators off the staff of his intelligence committee. He obliged State and C.I.A. by asking the Justice Department to investigate Senator Helms.

They all backed into a buzz saw. Jesse Helms promptly exposed and denounced the probe, which has fizzled. Recently, William Casey of the C.I.A. discovered the quiet power of the Senate Republicans' "4-H Club" — Helms, Hatch, Humphrey and Hecht — which other senators know will be growing in influence long after Casey, Shultz, Weinberger & Co. are gone.

What caused Director Casey to express extended ire to Senator Helms was the addition of information-prying amendments to the annual secret C.I.A. bill. As Stephen Engelberg of The New York Times revealed, the Senator had the temerity to ask for a new "Team B" — a group of outside experts to evaluate intelligence, as done a decade ago, to the nation's benefit — which Bill Casey evidently sees as a throwback to the days of agency weakness.

In this opening sally, Senator Helms did not get a Team B to pose a

fresh challenge to what he considers the C.I.A.'s inclination to minimize the Soviet threat. He did, however, legislate a secret question that is driving some spooks up the wall; further, the Helms pressure caused the publication of a list of questions that puts the agency on notice that company blunders, if not family jewels, are still subject to examination.

The Senate is demanding to know everything the C.I.A. has found out about the beheading in February of Hugo Spodafora, a critic of the Panamanian leader, Gen. Manuel Noriega. If the C.I.A. has information about the repressive activities of "the F-8 paramilitary force" of our Panamanian ally, its publication might stimulate human rights protests. The same types who pass around the intelligence on General Pinochet are now required to cough up the reports on General Noriega.

The other calling card left by Jesse that is causing apoplexy at Langley is the list of 32 "intelligence problems" published in the Congressional Record of Sept. 24. Like Poe's purloined letter, this eye-opening compilation has been ignored by the media because it is out in the open, but spooks unaware of the range of senatorial staff sources are calling it "The Revenge of Mike the Pill."

The list calls for "competitive analysis" (not a Team B, but the inclusion of in-house dissents on key judgments in footnotes) of everything from "the role of Soviet bloc intelligence services in the international drug trade" to "the extent of Soviet Active Measures, disinformation and forgeries inside the United States."

Many items on the list are boilerplate queries ("The reasons for the continuing underestimation by C.I.A. of Soviet strategic forces") or retaliatory needles ("The possibility that the C.I.A. and the State Department have been penetrated by the K.G.B.").

But then comes Item No. 32, and the gulping can be heard across the Potomac: "Reasons for reported C.I.A. long-term underestimation of Soviet submarine capabilities."

All I know about subs is what I read in "The Hunt for Red October," but this item suggests that one member of our National Foreign Intelligence Board — presumably Naval Intelligence — was caught napping on a development profoundly affecting our security. One deduces that we now know that Soviet subs can do what we thought they would not be able to do for many years, and that our expectation of early warning was misplaced. (Wasn't the Walker spy ring involved in the sale of submarine-detection secrets?)

Most of us don't want to know all the details of this lapse, or of its effect on the vulnerability of our Trident retaliation. But it is urgent that the proper oversight crowd in the Congress, outside the defense establishment, be forced to learn everything about it.

That's why the seemingly petty crossfire between the 4-H Club and the folks across the river is so significant. When proud power centers get piqued at each other's prerogatives, national defense secrets get a hard new look, and terrible mistakes can be recognized and corrected. □